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ABSTRACT

The culture of the composition profession has engaged in grossly overgeneralizing the problems students have, and students have bought into teachers' descriptions. Composition teachers need to take responsibility for the ways in which they have diminished students. In a detailed account of the construction of students, Marguerite Helmers identifies "lack" as the central perception of practitioners. Other metaphors are used to characterize students as children, as beasts, as diseased or ill, as foreign or exotic, as savages, as violent. The respectful language composition teachers have become sensitized to use when talking about people of other ethnicities, classes and genders has not spilled over into their talk about students. One reason for this is the dominance of a behavioral model of teaching. Comments from three classes of first-year writing students describe how they view themselves as writers--few of them were able to describe themselves in positive terms, and a number of them used "child" metaphors. Suggestions for giving students opportunities to construct themselves include: have students write at the beginning of the semester about their accomplishments as writers; survey students on what helps them write; use a portfolio; conduct an analysis of error with students; and check in with students frequently to learn about their attitudes and assumptions. Composition teachers need to stop making students objects, placing them in the position of the Other, and allow them to be the subjects of their own stories of who they are, why they write, and how they write. (RS)

Students Constructing Themselves: Let Them Tell Us How to Teach Them

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CCCC 1998 (Chicago)

In her discussion of the representation of students in the professional lore of the field of composition, entitled Writing Students, Marguerite Helmers, describes the testimonial. This narrative of teacher lore pervades the field, Helmers argues, in such places as CCC's "Staffroom Interchange" and has a longstanding tradition in recurring outcries about the state of literacy in this country, dating back to Harvard's 1890 Committee of Ten which was outraged by the inadequacies it found in student themes.

Testimonials, written practitioner lore, "resemble pieces of historical nonfiction, yet in their narrative structure they ow much to fictional genres. Generically, they exhibit elements of narrative, argument, and essayistic prose. Students enter the text as if they simply are, and frequent appeals to shared experience with deviant students among teachers indicates a widespread assumption that there is an essential, transhistorical student" (2). Tom Fox recognizes the same phenomenon. In his The Social Uses of Writing, he describes the ways in which students of different genders, ethnicities, and classes are reduced to generic studenthood, their pasts and personal contexts erased by the institution of school.

Drawing on a variety of sources (journals, textbooks, conference presentations, books on teaching), Helmers examines in great detail the description of the generic student, the stock

character whose "inability to perform well in school is his defining feature" (4), constructed in practitioner lore. The tropes used in professional writing "emphasize the stupid, beastlike, and childish aspects of college writers" (1). In the lore of the practitioner, however, there is salvation. An important feature of the testimonial is the claim of the teacher that his or her pedagogy, his or her approach will bring the students from darkness into light, from emotion into reason, from childhood into adulthood, from error to correctness.

In her detailed account of the construction of students, Helmers identifies lack as the central perception of practitioners. Other metaphors are used that characterize students as children, as beasts, as diseased or ill, as foreign or exotic, as savages, as violent. In addition, they are satirized and/or parodied. Basic writing students, as you might imagine, especially suffer under this perception of students. They are expected to fail. North's account of the "Basic Writing Story," shows these students as stuck between a rock and a hard place. Students are represented as being "scarred by repeated experience with failure" (22) and thus their potential for success is seen as diminished. In addition to the accounts of students with these emotional problems or pathologies--"'fear,' 'low self-esteem,' 'an emotional block' or a 'hang up'"--are representations of students who are ill and need to be "isolated" or quarantined into "noncredit classes" where they can be diagnosed, studied, treated, and cured (64). Perhaps the best of the testimonials represent students as children, as uninitiated, as inexperienced, as immature. All of you have probably experienced--in one form or another--the satire or parody of the inexperienced students. They

usually take the form of lists of silly errors students make. In this day and age, they are likely to travel on the internet, but sometimes they are the subject of newspaper feature articles or departmental collections of bloopers. When I first went to the University of Nevada, they were part of the entertainment at the Christmas party. The parody and satire reinforce the construction of the student as Other, but often take on more lethal form in the classroom where constructions of students affect our expectations of them, our attitudes toward them, and our pedagogies. Most often these attitudes are formed and these pedagogies are developed in the virtual absence of any collaboration or communication from students about how they view themselves, how they wish to be regarded. I agree with Helmers that the profession has created an orientalized student. In fact, P.C. seems not to hold sway when professionals are talking about students. The respectful language we have become sensitized to use when talking about people of other ethnicities, classes and genders has not spilled over into our talk about students. Outside of the academy, we would be appalled to hear someone say, for example, about African Americans: We need "to replace old reflexes with new ones, to get rid of reflexes which are socially undesirable, or just plain ineffective and to substitute for them new reflexes which are socially desirable and positively effective." Outside the academy, we would never dream of saying about gays: They "have difficulty with the grammatical conventions of their native tongue, . . . have never written anything in high school except a few book-reports, dutifully and laboriously copied from an encyclopedia, . . . have never read a full-length book and . . . profess unabashedly to us, at the slightest urging, that

they hate to read" (32). Nor would we be comfortable hearing a description of Asians: In all Asian work "I find the same thing: in reading, a lack of understanding of the meaning of words in context, a lack of sensitivity to the powers of limitations of words, a lack of interest in and healthy curiosity about words; and in writing, the fruits therof, namely incorrect, vague, imprecise, inappropriate, uninteresting, and ultimately ineffective diction" (34). Yet all of these enormously over-generalized stereotypes of students are central to our hierarchical culture which defines students as lacking, so much a part of our cultural construction that we are unconscious to their power and their impact.

I believe one reason for this picture we have painted is the dominance of a behavior model of teaching. In Teaching Grammar in Context, Constance Weaver describes the two different pictures of learning posited by a behaviorist model and a constructivist model of learning. (Put up overhead) A behavioral model places emphasis on product and error. The goal of a pedagogy in this model is the elimination of error and the learning of proper forms. And underlying this pedagogy is the belief that language is learned as the result of direct, systematic, focused teaching about aspects of language--parts to whole--the foundation for the use of grammar lessons and practice in skills development. A constructivist model, on the other hand, sees errors as "good" because they are evidence of the hypotheses students are making about what language is how it works. It can inform both student and teacher about what the student's understandings are. It can make visible the model of language the student is operating on. Moreover, this view sees errors as "a natural part of learning a language; they

arise from learners' active strategies: overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete rule application, hypothesizing false concepts" (63). The theoretical basis of a constructivist approach posits that students learn language naturally, from using it in meaningful situations where they are able to communicate in authentic ways. This learning perspective (as opposed to a teaching perspective) reconstructs the teachers' roles as ones in which they "assist the learner in approximating the target language; support active learning strategies and recognize that not all errors will disappear" (63).

This particular theoretical stance is difficult in a culture like ours where a behaviorist approach is manifest in many ways. The standards movement which reinforces the lockstep system of education is one example of this. Though some professionals have made efforts to educate the public and politicians about the nature of language development, the accountability mavens have maintained control and in both national and local standards emphasis is being placed on students having mastered particular skills by particular grade levels. In our own field, the continued practice--supported by the enormously influential textbook publishers--of grammar exercises and grammar lessons and grammar workbooks is evidence of our lack of belief in our students to learn language without direct instruction. Many teachers still use marginalia to point out errors in the hopes of correcting students' language. Both of these practices are based in behaviorist views of language learning and continue despite mounting research that people best learn language when it is contextualized, meaningful, and authentic.

In a constructivist model of teaching, the assumption is,

then, that we have to look at individual students. We have to know their interests, their own goals for learning, and a good deal about how they use language. In focusing on language development, we need to engage students in rich language activity that gives them opportunities to work with language in ways they find meaningful. And we need to help them in ways they wish to be helped. In order to do with we need to allow students to tell us who they are, they (with our encouragement and support) need to engage in the process of constructing themselves, of describing where they are in their learning, and where they want to go.

Unfortunately the pervasive institutional construction of students has had a major impact on how they see themselves. The following comments come from three classes first-year writing students describing how they viewed themselves as writers. Although they don't use metaphors of illness or deviance in their descriptions of themselves, few of them were able to describe themselves in very positive terms, and a number of them used "child" metaphors:

"To be honest, I don't feel confident as a writer. I feel disorganized and most of the time, I feel like I am writing like a third grader. When I sit down to write an essay and it takes me three or four minutes before I can even think of a sentence to write. I usually erase that sentence and the process begins again."

"Well, crudely put: I don't suck. But I'm also only nineteen years old, a freshman in college, and recognize the distance I have to go before I can write anything substantial (by any standards). I see myself as a child. Learning to ride a bike is learning all the grammer (sic) rules. Tying my own shoe is

creating a new metephore (sic). I'm just kind of growing up, playing with the little I do know."

"I don't think I'm a very good writer. Everything I write, to me seems to be dumb. It seems like it doesn't make sense and I feel like I write with the vocabulary of a five year old. I feel like what I write doesn't make sense and is unorganzed. When I write, I feel like I know what I want to say and when it comes out on the paper it doesn't make sense to anyone but me."

Many students in responding to the query "How do you see yourself as a writer?" answer that they don't see themselves as writers.

"I wouldn't consider myself a writer at all. I write because I have to or because I want to describe something amazing that I saw in my journal. My writings consist of stories that only I can truly experience."

"I don't really see myself as a writer. Writing is just a thing that I do in order for me to get through college."

"I don't normally think of myself as a writer. But, I guess I'm just the voice of the average Joe, writing what I think. I'm not fancy, fresh, or funny, but I'm frank. I don't like to embellish my thoughts with a bunch of fruity technical words."

"I don't usually consider myself a writer. I just assume the position when I have to write a paper. I never thought about this before! I just write whenever necessary."

Still others see themselves as poor writers:

"As a writer, I think that I have poor writing skills. I can develop a story but I have a hard time telling the reader the story."

"Writing to me has never been a favorite of mine. All the

rules and structures behind it makes me go crazy, so when I am asked to envision myself as a writer all I can see is a picture of myself, pulling out my hair. The vision is frustrating and stressful to see and my muscles tense up as I picture myself sitting in front of the blank monitor."

"As a writer I would characterize myself as a struggler and a wanderer. I tend to have a hard time with getting papers started and once I get started I tend to wander into different areas. I try to stick with one area but I have no ideas what happens."

"I would call myself a poor writer because I have never been taught the basic fundamentals and I wish that was something that could have been changed earlier.

And ESL student provides the key to a lot of students struggles in writing classes:*"As a writer, I don't usually feel very comfortable with my paper when I done with it. But at least, someone told me that my paper is good and then that will made me feel good about it. I know it is not suppose to be this way, but it always being like that always."*

Many students who describe their writing are certainly reflecting the vague negative descriptions that they seem unable to use to improve their work. Some of students'descriptions of themselves provide alternative pictures and allow us another sort of understanding of students' self perception.

"I envision myself as a cautious writer. I take a lot of time in preparing for a piece of writing oftentimes I change my topic or writing tone. I wish that I could be more creative with my writing, however, I often find myself drawing blanks. Also I wish that in my writing I could use a broader vocabulary to make it more interesting."

"I see myself as a storytelling with my style of writing. I think I usually try to inform my readers with the style of writing that I present. I feel I tend to do better with assignments where I'm given the freedom to write about any topic I choose because when I am narrowed down to one topic I usually don't present a very good product."

"I feel that overall I am a good writer. I can however see many faults in my writing. I always have grammer mistakes in my writing. Sometimes I don't get my point across because I focus on arguments instead of conclusions."

"I see myself as a relatively strong writer with a few flaws here and there. One of my biggest problems is my use of tense. I always jump back and forth between first and second tense. I am better writing factual essays rather than creative fiction."

"I feel that I'm an adequate writer. I can usually turn out a good essay pretty quick (not including the extra eyes to look at it). I also tend to write okay analytical essays, although they are not my favorite. That's as far as I would give myself credit though. The main reason is that sometimes I don't express my ideas so they just say <u>wow</u>. I have tried to get rid of the problem and it is going slowly, but surely."

Opportunities for students to describe themselves as writers--at who they are as writers, their goals, skills, and plans--will allow students to have more power in constructing themselves and give us a healthier, more detailed, more accurate, less stereotypical alternative to the unproductive and negative construction of students that have dominated much of the professional literature. You may already use many of the practices I suggest for giving students opportunities to construct

themselves. I hope there will be some useful new suggestions as well.

--Have students write to you at the beginning of the semester describing their accomplishments as writers, their interests as writers, their goals as writers. Use this information to guide assignments in your classes. Individualize assignments. Allow many opportunities for students to choose what they wish to write about. In experimenting with self-selected topics in my own classrooms, I found students interested in a range of topics and--in a writing workshop--observed them capable of inspiring one another to try different approaches and topics.

--When students finish a draft of a paper, ask them to tell you and their other readers (classmates, friends, writing center tutors) what to attend to, what to respond to. Because students have relied on the teacher to tell them what's good and bad about their writing (and that's how they perceive it), they often start out being uncertain what they want their responders to attend to because they have spent so many years being told about their writing. Having students decide what they care about takes time and patience.

--Survey students on what helps them write. I have asked students to list in order the classroom practices they find useful and ones that don't. This survey can be adapted to collect commentary from your students on the practices you typically used or have been used by teachers in other writing classes that you may not use. (Overhead)

--Use a portfolio. Allow students to decide what represents their best work and present that. Allow them to describe what worked and didn't in their writing. Ask them to characterize

their writing through an introduction to the portfolio, much as a professional writer will introduce a collection of essays or even a work of fiction.

--With students, conduct an analysis of error. Rather than engaging in a shotgun approach to error, have students look carefully at the kinds of errors that are typical of they writing of them and their classmates. Then provide the terminology that will allow all of you to talk about the sort of error it is. It's important in these discussions to contextualize issues of error historically and in terms of status. Errors, too, are socially constructed issues not pre-ordained by God.

--Check in with students frequently to learn about their attitudes and assumptions about what's happening in your classroom. As students come into the class ask them to write briefly about what they are hoping to work on that day, what they are hoping to accomplish. At other times, pause in the middle of a writer's workshop to have students write about how things are going, whether they are accomplishing what they need to. At the end of the class from time to time, have them write about what they would like to give attention to next. In short, keep tabs on how people are doing, what they want, what they need. You can accomplish some of this understanding in conferences, but you can update your attunedness by quickly reading through the responses and seeing who needs what.

--Count everybody in. Sometimes students put us off by taking on attitudes of recalcitrance, resistance, and rebellion. Think of these, too, as socially constructed. Students have had--especially students we've labeled "basic writers"--institutional experiences that have made them feel undervalued and incompetent.

But language is the deepest, most personal, and most profound of human activities we engage in. Everyone wants to be heard. Everyone wants to be known. Everyone wants to have a voice. Writing gives access for everyone to have those needs met. Our goal in writing classes should be to help those students recover their voices, in the literal sense of the word.

I believe that teachers need to take responsibility for the ways in which they have diminished students. The culture of our profession has engaged in grossly overgeneralizing the problems our students have (aided by an eager, elitist, conservative press) and students have bought in to our descriptions. From now on, we need to engage in collaboration with our students in careful, detailed, scholarly, analytical practices that look realistically at the writing of our students. This analysis--that we undertake with our students--needs to be grounded in a critical discussion of the historical, social, and cultural values of a society that has marginalized various ethnic groups and social classes and deemed their language inadequate. And finally, we need to stop making students objects, placing them in the position of the Other, and allow them to be the subjects of their own stories of who they are, why they write, how they write. They will then have to power to rewrite themselves out of the negative constructions that have served them so badly.

Child Metaphors:

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Here's what I can do:

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